

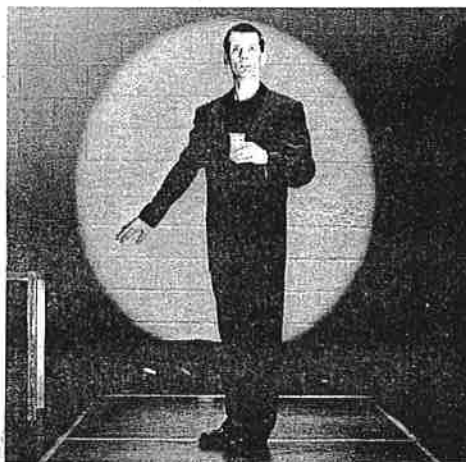
# GUARDIAN

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**a&c** theater

## Let there be light

Anne Bogart and SITI create an impressionistic portrait of director Robert Wilson in *Bob*.  
By Brad Rosenstein



Lights ... action: The SITI Company uses Robert Wilson's theatrical methods and their own to paint a portrait of the artist in *Bob*, starring Will Bond.

If you've ever seen the work of visionary theater director Robert Wilson, you know how hypnotic, magical, and sometimes maddening it can be. The slow progression of astounding images can place you in a near trancelike state, but his work's often protracted sense of time, its reliance on intuitive imagery for both content and form, its repetitions and nonlinearity can also suggest the worst kind of avant-garde excesses. Wilson's theatrical world is simultaneously so simple and so complex that even he doesn't always get it right, and because his work is so instinctive and handmade, it's difficult to imagine anyone but Wilson getting meaningful results with his approach.

Director Anne Bogart and her SITI Company take a crack at it with *Bob*, a dramatic portrait inspired by Wilson that combines his theatrical methods and their own. Using Wilson's own words, culled from dozens of interviews and assembled by dramaturge Jocelyn Clarke, the piece interweaves biography and artistic philosophy in a theatrical wonderland. Neil Patel's beautifully spare scenic design summons up a Wilsonian stage dominated by lighting equipment. Light is Wilson's muse and the very manifestation of his art, both its theatricality and its spirituality. Bogart and lighting designer Mimi Jordan Sherin make it reflect his personality as well, telling as much of the story as possible through Wilson's favored medium.

Will Bond makes a marvelous Bob, using SITI's trademark stylization of voice and gesture to navigate the artist's articulate and evasive relationship to his work. The piece posits Wilson in the throes of a creative crisis: a workaholic beginning to wonder if he's kidding himself with his decades of creating "pretty pictures." For two-thirds of its length, the piece winningly

connects Wilson's aesthetic obsessions (embodied in the slow-motion pouring of a glass of milk à la Wilson's *Deafman Glance*) to his fish-out-of-water Texas upbringing, his parents' confusion over his work, and his growing dismay at finding himself — a quintessentially American artist — an expatriate whose work is largely unknown in his own country.

Unfortunately, the piece loses its thread as the staging gets more frenetic and the repetitions more formalistic. The irony of Wilson's theater is that its mathematical precision results in moving spectacles, while in Bogart's theater nearly the reverse is true. I was delighted by SITI's affecting *Room*, a portrait of Virginia Woolf that is the companion to *Bob* in the company's current run at the Magic Theatre. Even granting that Wilson is a more elusive figure than Woolf, this piece doesn't quite achieve the radiant human core of *Room*. I also wonder how much audiences who don't know Wilson's work will care about this unfamiliar figure. Personally, I was fascinated with the shape and texture of *Bob*, even as I felt its subject slipping through its theatrical net.

### Queen's gambit

At first glance, Lynn Nottage's play *Las meninas* has nothing to do with Velázquez's great painting of that name, and the title seems like a misleading tease. But as you look closer, connections emerge. The play, set in the court of France's King Louis XIV, focuses not on the Sun King but on the women, children, and attendants who are often ignored in the historical chronicles — just as Velázquez painted a portrait of those outside the official frame. Nottage throws imaginative light on a factual but erased historical chapter: the illicit relationship between Louis's wife, Queen Marie-Thérèse (Mercedes Herrero)

and her "fool," the African dwarf Nabo (Daniel Bryant). Their liaison resulted in a child, Louise (Rachel Zawadi Luttrell), who was sequestered for life in a convent.

Nottage reconstructs this concealed history with healthy irreverence and a contemporary eye to issues of race, gender, and class. Nabo and the queen, for all their differences, share a touching loneliness and need that drives them together. Nottage's principal characters are deftly sketched, and her language is delightfully rich. However, the framing device of the nun Louise slowly learning about her past is awkward and unconvincing, and Louise is oddly bland.

Herrero splendidly nails the delicate line between the queen's comic brio and emotional depth, and Bryant is excellent as the gentle, reluctantly amusing dwarf. Director Michael Donald Edwards does a first-rate job managing Nottage's tricky mix of spoof and soul, and he beautifully stages the San Jose Repertory Theatre premiere. Gordana Svilar's fluid and streamlined set, Robert Jared's lights, and especially B. Modern's extraordinary costumes are all luscious, fusing past and present in a single witty stroke. ♦

*'Bob'* runs Wed/27–Sat/30, 8 p.m. (also Sat/30, 2:30 p.m.); Sun/31, 2:30 p.m., Cowell Theatre, Fort Mason Center, Marina at Laguna, S.F. \$22–\$47. (415) 441-8822, [www.magictheatre.org](http://www.magictheatre.org).

*'Las meninas'* runs through April 21. Wed/27, Tues/2–Wed/3, Tues/9, April 16, and Thurs.–Sat., 8 p.m. (also Wed/27, noon; Sat/30, Sat/6, and April 13, 3 p.m.; no shows April 18–19); Sun., 7 p.m. (also Sun/7, April 14, and April 21, 2 p.m.; April 21, 2 p.m. show only), San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Pasco de San Antonio, San Jose. \$26–\$44. (408) 367-7255.